

“The World Turned Upside Down”

Introduction: The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus by Hans Jacob Christoffel

von Grimmelshausen

By Kevin Cramer

Two hundred years after it ended, the collective memory of the Thirty Years’ War continued to exert a strong pull on the historical imagination of Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Luise Mühlbach’s popular historical novel of the war, The Victims of Religious Fanaticism, was breathlessly advertised in 1872 as the story of “an epoch of the most fanatical and savage conflict” that raged through Germany “with devastation and fire for a quarter of a century. . . . a time filled with shame and horror!” In German folklore the second decade of the conflict, the period between 1630 and 1638 known as the “Swedish War,” was remembered as the “time of annihilation.” Farmers throughout central and southern Germany, when questioned by travelers curious about the ruins of nearby abandoned villages and manors, would recall the tales passed down through the generations into the nineteenth century and reply, “That happened in the Swedish War—the Swede did that!”

Even as the passage of time gradually effaced the scars the war left on the German landscape, the estimation of the extent of the civilian losses caused by Europe’s first “total war” understandably fluctuated given the lack of exact and reliable demographic data for historians to work with. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the popular belief, endorsed by many historians, was that almost

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70% of Germany's pre-war population, some fifteen million people, died in the conflict. Estimates at the other end of the scale put the number of lost at anywhere between 15 and 30%, that is, between three and six million dead, while claiming that some of the most devastated areas, notably the Rhine Palatinate, northern Bavaria, Bohemia, Mecklenburg, and Brandenburg, were virtually depopulated by famine, disease, and forced migration. Modern scholarship has arrived at a consensus that estimates that the total demographic decline amounted to about a third of the pre-war population, that is between six and six and half million dead. But, as Peter Wilson has pointed out, even a population loss of 15% would put the Thirty Years' War at the top of the list of the most destructive of European conflicts, with World War II (6%) and World War I (5.5%) ranking a distant second and third. Even after the wars of the twentieth century, for many Germans the Thirty Years' War, in the scale of the suffering it had inflicted on the German nation, would be remembered as a catastrophe unique in history.¹

The cruel nature of the war, and the lasting bitterness it generated, was rooted in religious conflict. For most Germans, the Thirty Years' War would always be remembered as a civil war whose origins were to be found in the "great schism" of the Reformation of 1517. This collapse of the universal Catholic Church led to the division of authority among the sovereign German polities of the Holy Roman Empire between rulers who had adopted Protestantism and those who continued to adhere to the Catholic Church (and the secular authority of the Habsburg emperor in Vienna). An uneasy "confessional peace" had been negotiated in 1555 between the Catholic and Lutheran princes which stipulated that subjects were to follow the confession of their

ruler (*"cuius regio, eius religio"*). Though few expected this settlement to be permanent, the Peace of Augsburg was largely successful in keeping the peace in Central Europe for over half a century.

This peace finally broke down in 1618 in the form of a revolt of the aristocracy in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic), who asserted what they believed was their legal right to choose a Protestant ruler from one of the smaller German states. Ferdinand II, the Habsburg emperor in Vienna who had assumed the throne in 1619, viewed this as an usurpation of his authority and an impermissible Protestant infiltration of the Habsburg crown lands. With the aid of the Catholic League army under Maximilian I of Bavaria, and the financial support of Spain and the Pope, Ferdinand crushed the Bohemian rebellion, dispersed the forces of the Protestant Union that had been mobilized to support the rebels, and brutally restored his control over the renegade territory. The conflict expanded, however, as Ferdinand opportunistically used the suppression of the revolt to advance the larger cause of the Counter-Reformation and re-Catholicize the Protestant German states of the Holy Roman Empire by force. In the meantime, those powers that had supported the Protestant Union, France, the United Netherlands, Denmark and, eventually, Sweden, would also see the conflict as an opportunity and determined to intervene in the war on the side of the German Protestant princes to acquire territory and accelerate the dissolution of Habsburg power in Europe. What had started as a localized rebellion, fuelled by religious animosities, in the Holy Roman Empire soon turned into a war for strategic dominance in Central Europe. It would drag on, waxing and waning in intensity, for another thirty years. Yet the treaty signed in 1648 that ended the war, the Peace of

Westphalia, more or less confirmed the religious status quo and balance of power that had existed in 1618. How, then, to make sense of the horrific destruction the war had wrought?

The sharp confessional divide between Protestant and Catholic Germany shaped all subsequent narratives of the war (as it shaped German politics and culture) well into the twentieth century. Germany's Protestants recalled the war as one more chapter in Germany's long struggle, beginning in 1517 (and culminating in German unification in 1871 under Prussian leadership), to liberate itself from foreign domination and territorial and political disunity. Catholic Germans, on the other hand, saw this Protestant narrative (primarily advanced by Prussian historians) as a calculated attempt to write them out of German history as less than "authentic" Germans whose ancestors had fought for a "confederal" idea of Germany under an imperial Catholic monarchy. The meaning of the war, passionately contested in German national memory, persisted as a collective spiritual burden and psychological trauma because it was seen as a civil war that pitted two very different visions of "Germany" against each other.²

History has shown that the wounds left by civil wars take the longest to heal. This is why the Thirty Years' War, for many Germans, was a past that would not pass (Americans, in particular, should be able to recognize this persistence of memory). "Germany's Darkest Hour" was the title that the cultural historian Karl Biedermann chose for his influential 1862 history of the war. In it Biedermann lamented the "unparalleled ruin of the entire German national body" by the war and its devastating psychological legacy, which he diagnosed as "the weakening of the national spirit." Gustav Freytag's best-selling series of popular histories, Pictures from the German

Past, which appeared in numerous editions from the 1860s on, warned readers that they were taking up a story of “a sad, joyless time.” Freytag introduced his history of “the Great War” by describing it as a “terrible natural disaster . . . which had destroyed the strength of the German people.”

The dark maelstrom of the Thirty Years’ War, a chaotic time when the natural order of society and authority was inverted, shadowed modern Germany with multiple narratives of victimization. Prevalent anxieties about German cultural backwardness, political weakness, religious fragmentation, and economic progress measured against that of rival nations found vivid expression in the nineteenth-century histories of the war. In his commemorative history marking the bicentennial of the Peace of Westphalia in 1848, Karl Schmidt wrote that the war had undermined “all the foundations of civil, domestic, and moral life.” Writing in the early 1830s, the historian Friedrich Raumer lingered on the image of a world turned upside down in which “the maxim became all crimes were virtuous, all virtue the work of the devil.” Some two decades later, Heinrich Hecht declared that “cunning and deceit became universal,” while Otto Krabbe mourned that “the word of God was exiled from the land.” A deluxe modern edition of Freytag’s history, published in 1925 (two years after the “Great Disorder” of Weimar Germany’s period of hyperinflation), was illustrated with a reproduction of a seventeenth-century series of satirical wood-cuts titled “The World Turned Upside Down” that depicted, among other disquieting marvels, the master serving the servant, the blind leading the sighted, the lamb eating the wolf, and the sheep shearing the shepherd.

Grimmelshausen's novel, The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus, is, at its heart, a story of the pilgrim Simplicius's journey through the inverted moral universe of the Thirty Years' War. As a narrative of Simplicius's progress across the battlefields of Germany, from innocence through temptation to redemption, Grimmelshausen's novel resists easy categorization. Its title promises, at one level, a heroic picaresque romance in the metafictional mold of Cervantes's Don Quixote (first published in 1605; Simplicissimus first appeared in 1668), but it also anticipates the Bildungsroman tradition of German Romanticism, notably Wieland's History of Agathon (1766-1767) and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister (1795-1796). The mystical passages of the novel's concluding sections even suggest that Grimmelshausen, a convert to Catholicism, wanted his book, at least in part, to be read as a Christian allegory on the models of the Psychomachia (ca. 400 AD), Hartmann's Der Arme Heinrich (ca. 1190), and Piers Plowman (ca. 1370-1390).

But Simplicissimus perhaps holds the greatest meaning for the modern reader as a story of war in all of its horror and absurdity, which is why this new translation is so welcome. The catastrophic violence of total war, shot through with the red thread of ideological and genocidal terror that is woven into the history of the twentieth century, was prefigured in the wars of religion that wracked Europe from 1517 to 1648. Like all wars fought to advance the "one true faith," these were conflicts of surpassing cruelty. Grimmelshausen makes this cruelty the foundation of his story and the main force that shapes his protagonist because, as Montaigne declares in his own meditation on cruelty, "virtue demands a harsh and thorny road." Montaigne, born a century before

Grimmelshausen and whose entire adult life was lived amid the upheaval of the French wars of religion, knew well how war put reason and virtue to flight:

[O]wing to the license of our civil wars . . . there is nothing to be found in ancient histories more extreme than what we witness every day. . . . I could hardly persuade myself, before I had actual evidence, that there exist any souls so unnatural to commit murder for the mere pleasure of doing so; as to hack and chop off men's limbs, as to sharpen their wits for the invention of unusual tortures and new forms of death . . . merely for the enjoyment of the pleasing spectacle afforded by the pitiful gestures and motions, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish.³

In condemning the barbarism of his epoch's holy wars, Montaigne undermined an essential myth of European civilization: the elevating conviction that the light of Christianity was guiding the world out of pagan darkness and brutality.

Yet, through the eyes of Grimmelshausen's protagonist, we see war as it has always been and always will be: a destructive energy that is integral to all cultures and all civilizations. Grimmelshausen also understood, as perhaps Montaigne could not acknowledge (even as he understood it), that all wars are fundamentally "wars of God" because those who are sent to war are initially compelled to believe that God is on their side. The books of the Old Testament, particularly the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations, passed on to western culture a narrative tradition that traced the history of nations in the history of war, a tradition they shared with the chroniclers of pagan antiquity. The origins of peoples, tribes, and nations are

inseparable from the experience of war, war that threatens the annihilation of the group and comes as the test and judgment of God. In the two books of Chronicles in the Old Testament, we read the story of the conquest of Judah by the tribes of Israel, a narrative that is intended to establish the legitimacy of the Davidic kings. I Chronicles tells the story of the war against the Hagarites by the sons of Reuben and their allies, concluding, “Many fell slain, because the war was of God.” In Isaiah God promises the chosen people of Israel: “I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish.” This is the law of war for the conquest of the Promised Land proclaimed in Deuteronomy: “But as for the towns of these peoples which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.” But should apostasy break the covenant between the chosen people and God, Jeremiah warns of His oncoming judgment in the violence of war: “a destroyer of nations has set out; he is gone out from his place to make your land a waste; your cities will be ruins without inhabitant.” The Book of Lamentations graphically describes this divine judgment of Israel as it encompassed the destruction of Jerusalem: “The young and old are lying on the ground in the streets; my young women and my young men are fallen by the sword; in the day of your anger you have killed them, slaughtering without mercy.”

In The Iliad, Homer tells how the gods sent “. . . strong Hatred, the defender of peoples,” into ranks of the Achaians and the Trojans. Homer’s plot is simple: the gods pass judgment on the Achaians and the Trojans, inciting the furies of vengeance, the epic cycle of retribution, in a vast spectacle of blood and mutilation. The Achaian’s

sacrifice is the more worthy: Troy is defeated. Hektor assaults the fortifications of around the Achaian fleet amid “battlements awash with blood,” severed heads spinning and bouncing like balls, eyes being gouged out, and “entrails spurt[ing] from the bronze.” Herodotus, in The History, takes up the narrative of Troy in his own fashion, describing the abduction of Helen as retribution of the Greeks’ abduction of the daughter of king of the Colchians and sets the stage for his history of the war between the Greeks and the Persians in the fifth century B.C.: “I will set my mark upon that man that I myself know began unjust acts against the Greeks, and, having so marked, I will go forward in my account, covering alike the small and great cities of mankind.”

Retribution and the redress of injustice; Herodotus, like Homer, takes these as his themes when he writes that the oracle at Delphi demanded that the sacrifice of the Spartans at Thermopylae, and the sacking of Athens and defilement of the holy sanctuary in the Acropolis, be avenged: “...the shrines of the gods and their images [have been] burned and destroyed; it lies upon us of necessity to avenge these to the uttermost rather than make terms with him that did these things.”

Thucydides, Herodotus’s contemporary, transforms the nature of the “unjust act” that demands that our enemies be slaughtered “without mercy.” His History of the Peloponnesian War foreshadows the modern, secular war narrative. Nation begins to replace godhead, with Homer’s “Hatred, defender of peoples” driving the cycle of retribution forward. The Thebans demand from Sparta the right to punish the Plataeans, who were in league with Sparta: “...our demand for vengeance is a righteous demand...when people suffer what they deserved, as in the case with the Plataeans, their fate, far from provoking pity, is a matter for satisfaction...they must stand their trial.”

200 Plataeans were put to death, their women were enslaved, and the city was razed to the ground. Thucydides' history ends with the destruction of the Athenian expedition on the river Assinarus in Sicily in 413 B.C.: "The Peloponnesians came down and slaughtered them," Thucydides coolly records, "especially those who were in the river." He concludes his account by describing how the survivors of the massacre were imprisoned in a quarry, "...[where] the bodies [were] all heaped together on top of one another of those who had died from their wounds or from the change of temperature or other such causes, so the smell was insupportable." Here, in this bloody, stinking pit, Thucydides chose to see a glorious chapter in the history of the Greeks: "This was the greatest Hellenic action that took place during this war and, in my opinion, the greatest action that we know of in Hellenic history--to the victors, the most brilliant of successes, to the vanquished, the most calamitous of defeats...their sufferings were of an enormous scale; their losses were, as they say, total..." Even if we remain uncertain whether Thucydides appreciated the irony (or moral inversion) of celebrating the "brilliance" of the horror that took place on the banks of the Assinarus, we can be sure that Grimmelshausen would not have missed it.

Grimmelshausen had a keen understanding of hatred and the hypocrisy that accompanied it. "The war of God" driven forward by "strong hatred" would be central to the narrative of the twentieth century as well. What Wilfred Owen in 1918 called the "cess of war" would pour in torrents from the new godhead of nationalism that had risen in the nineteenth century. Edmund Wilson, quoting a Confederate battle song, offered a brutally apt label for this effluence of sacrifice to Leviathan: "patriotic gore." The nineteenth-century German histories of the Thirty Years' War were full of patriotic

gore. Their repetitive and numbing narratives of atrocity sedulously replicated the graphic accounts of torture, rape, and mutilation in Grimmelshausen's novel. These atrocities, in a widening gyre of retribution, were reimagined as acts of judgment, the violent redress of injustice. For their part, the victims were offered up to God, their sufferings laid bare to the reader as a mark of grace and redemption. Who had suffered more in the Thirty Years' War, Protestant or Catholic, for Germany and their faith? Writing in 1816, a Catholic playwright described the advance of the Swedish army on Villingen and the desperate resistance of the town: "Our loyalty to the Kaiser," one citizen declared, "and the fact that we remain true to our faith, enrages [the Swedes] so much that they refuse to spare the elderly, the mothers, the children [and threaten] that the name of Villingen will be wiped from the face of the earth, and those set wandering from the ruins will loudly lament: here was the revenge of the Swedes!" One hundred years later, in 1917, a counter-narrative of Protestant suffering was invoked to inspire Germans in the midst of another catastrophic conflict. The foreword to this volume, a collection of contemporary accounts of the Thirty Years' War, reprinted the preface to the 1683 edition of Simplicissimus which reminded "the Loyal German Reader" of the destruction of that seventeenth-century war: the burned villages, destroyed churches, and raped women, "a time when German blood had flowed like water"; all sacrifices demanded in defense of Germany liberty against the forces of tyranny.

Like Thucydides, Grimmelshausen had seen war at first hand. His experience of war, first as a bewildered and innocent civilian and then as a hardened and cynical soldier, informs his novel with the same visceral moral power that Francisco Goya would etch into his Disasters of War accompanied by his simple, horrified declaration:

“I saw this.” At one level, The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus belongs in the canon of the great first-person depictions of the horror of war along with Goya’s Disasters, Jacques Caillot’s The Great Miseries of War, and Otto Dix’s The War. But Grimmelshausen’s novel, as literature, also has a strikingly modern core. His narrative juxtaposes hilariously absurd and fantastical episodes that illustrate how war corrodes morality and mocks reason with passages that show with astonishing clarity and realism the true nature of war in all of its numbing cruelty, degradation, and terror. In this respect, Simplicissimus creates the template for such twentieth-century masterpieces as Jaroslav Hašek’s The Good Soldier Švejk, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s Journey to the End of the Night, Heinrich Böll’s The Train was on Time, Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, and Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow.

Grimmelshausen’s biography is somewhat sketchy, with many of its details subject to dispute. The title page of the novel offers the book as a “description of the life of a strange vagabond,” but only a minority of the book’s episodes, primarily in its opening chapters, are believed to correspond more or less to the author’s own experiences. It wasn’t until the middle of the nineteenth century that scholars even reliably identified Grimmelshausen as the novel’s author (the original title page gives the name of the “strange vagabond” as Melchior Sternfels von Fuchshaim). Hans Jacob Christoffel (the “von Grimmelshausen” was added later) was probably born in March of 1621 or 1622 in the Hessian town of Gelnhausen near Frankfurt am Main. Raised by his grandparents, it is believed he was attending school in 1634 in Gelnhausen, which had long been occupied by Spanish Catholic troops, when Protestant forces invaded the region in August. A major battle was fought at nearby Nördlingen where the Swedes

attempted to break the imperial siege of the town. Their attack ultimately failed. Losses were heavy, with some 8,000 killed on both sides. As the imperial and Protestant armies clashed thousands of civilians, including the young Grimmelshausen, sought refuge in the nearby fortress of Hanau, which was invested itself until 1636 (the lifting of the siege by Swedish forces was celebrated in an annual mid-summer festival in Hanau through the nineteenth century). However, Grimmelshausen was taken prisoner by imperial forces in 1635. As was common with many prisoners taken in the Thirty Years' War, the teenager was quickly impressed into imperial service. As stable boy, he very likely witnessed the second siege of Magdeburg (whose destruction in 1631 had become a contemporary byword for brutality) and the battle of Wittstock in 1636.

By 1639, after serving in General Götz's Rhine army in 1637 and 1638, Grimmelshausen was a musketeer in an imperial regiment deployed near Strasbourg. By virtue of his Latin school education, he managed to lift himself out of the ranks when he became the regiment's clerk, an assignment that eventually led to his appointment as the personal secretary of another imperial regimental commander, Johann von Elter, in 1645. After the peace, Grimmelshausen converted to Catholicism (though some accounts date his conversion to the late 1630s), settled in Offenburg on the Rhine across from Strasbourg, married (and added "von" to his name), and took the job of administering the family properties of his first commander, Hans Reinhard von Schauenburg. From 1662 to 1665, he worked as the caretaker of a property of a Strasbourg doctor while running a small inn, "The Silver Star," in the village of Gaisbach. In 1667 he was appointed magistrate of the nearby town of Renchen, a post he held until he died in August 1676. It was in this latter period that he began work on

the novel that would make him the most widely read German author of the seventeenth century.⁴

The first edition of Simplicissimus was published in Nuremberg in 1668, with six further editions appearing in Grimmelshausen's lifetime. The original novel, The Adventures, consists of five "books." Encouraged by its success (a second, significantly altered edition, appeared in 1671), Grimmelshausen continued to work on, between 1669 and 1675, what came to be called the "Simplician Cycle," which he regarded as a single integral work. The "continuation" (and conclusion) of the adventures of Simplicissimus was published as a sixth book in 1669. An additional four books, published between 1670 and 1675, concluded the cycle and dealt with new characters and new narratives and themes connected to the war. The most well-known of these later works was The Life of the Arch-Cheat and Runagate Courage (1670), which inspired Berthold Brecht's famous play about the Thirty Years' War, Mother Courage (1939). Between 1683 and 1713, multi-volume editions of Grimmelshausen's works continued to appear, though these were heavily amended and altered by his publisher. By the late eighteenth century, however, these began to be superseded by editions that, while abridged (or "modernized") to make them more readable for a broader audience, were closer in content to the editions published in Grimmelshausen's lifetime.⁵

Simplicissimus was "re-discovered" as a great German novel in the first half of the nineteenth century when a younger generation of patriotic Germans, basking in the victorious glow of the "wars of liberation" that had freed the German states from occupation by Napoleonic France in 1813, began to envision a unified German nation and were determined, as part of the broader intellectual enterprise of promoting a

“German consciousness” (as opposed to the patchwork of regional loyalties that characterized the defunct Holy Roman Empire), to recover a narrative testifying to German suffering, resilience, and “national spirit.” The outpouring of new histories of the Thirty Years’ War in the nineteenth century, when the war was “re-fought” as part of the great debate over the shape of future unified Germany, was a remarkable manifestation of this nationalist project. The re-discovery of Simplicissimus or, more precisely, the re-assessment of Grimmelshausen’s reputation as a “writer of the people” (“Volksschriftsteller”) and the novel itself as an authentic expression of the “true German voice” and a reliable first-person account of Germany’s martyrdom during the war and, was an integral part of this debate.⁶ It also provided historians with a rich source for their accounts of the barbarism and devastation Germany had endured during the war. In countless histories of the war written during the first half of the nineteenth century, we find these historians incorporating, in detail and often verbatim, Grimmelshausen’s descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Swedish soldiers and the tortures meted out in return by peasants bent on retribution. In the novel’s harrowing opening chapters, we read of two gang rapes, a peasant roasted alive in an oven, numerous horrific mutilations, the crushing of skulls with knotted ropes and thumbs in the flintlocks of pistols, and the administration of the notorious “Swedish Punch,” which consisted mainly of liquid offal and manure forced down the victim’s throat. To understand the context within which these historians were using Grimmelshausen, it is important to remember that through the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, Grimmelshausen’s accounts of these atrocities were considered factually accurate. Because of the brutal realism of its descriptions of action

and landscape, and its rendering of the different German regional dialects, the novel was held in high regard as a singularly valuable seventeenth-century historical source. It needs to be pointed out that one notable peculiarity of the nineteenth-century's use of the novel as a historical source is that Protestant historians, while appropriating exactly the details of the atrocities in their own accounts, would simply transform the Swedish (and Protestant) perpetrators into imperial (and Catholic) soldiers.

It was the German Romantics that were probably the most influential in sparking modern interest in Simplicissimus as a work of literature. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the towering figure of the German Enlightenment, was an early promoter of the novel's importance to German culture and his advocacy was cited as the inspiration for three new editions that appeared between 1785 and 1810, a period that coincided with the breakdown of absolutist Europe into revolution and war.⁷ As the story of a "German hero" it was primarily commendable as a "novel of development," or Bildungsroman, in the tradition of Wieland's Agathon and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister (though the 1810 edition was advertised as an "adventure novel"). The publication of the first "modern" edition of the book in 1836 (based on the revised versions published between 1669 and 1671), was largely due to the endorsement of the poet Ludwig Tieck, one of the leading lights of the German Romantic movement. In 1838, the literary scholar Theodor Echtermeyer was able, for the first time, to conclusively establish Grimmelshausen as the author of the novel. Before Echtermeyer's research was published, "Grimmelshausen" had been widely assumed to be a pseudonym which, among other things, had encouraged the proliferation of amended, "improved," and radically altered versions of the novel over the course of a century and a half (one

estimate puts the number at over 150 different versions). Adelbert von Keller supervised a “scholarly” edition based on the 1668 version that was published in 1854. Keller also included a bibliography of Grimmelshausen’s works and a list of the all the variant editions of Simplicissimus that had appeared since the author’s death.⁸

Most of the “improvements” made to the early eighteenth and nineteenth-century editions of the novel were intended to render the language more accessible to modern readers, trim what were considered the overly-long “didactic” and moralizing sections (of uncertain authorship, some of these had been added since 1668), and, most importantly, to tone down the “obscene” and explicit descriptions of torture, rape, and sexual activity.⁹ By 1871, the year of German unification, Simplicissimus was firmly established as a chronicle of “true German life” of great national and cultural significance. In 1878, one reviewer praised Simplicissimus “as a true German novel, not only the best and most significant of the seventeenth century, but one of the best of all time.” It had become the German “national book” (“Volksbuch”). Its popularity in the nineteenth century has been ascribed to three main factors, one patriotic and two cultural.¹⁰ It appealed to the German nationalist imagination with its depiction of an genuine German hero and survivor emerging out of the chaos and destruction of the Thirty Years’ War. It satisfied the yearning for the recovery of examples of a lost and authentically German “people’s art” (“Volkskunst”). Finally, it entered a market in which there was a rising demand for “realistic” fiction that dealt with the major events of German history.¹¹

As an illustration of the prominence Simplicissimus had assumed in German cultural and intellectual life, it is worth pointing out that the novel became the subject

of a very revealing debate in the German parliament in 1876. The historical background to this debate was the ongoing political conflict known in Germany as the “culture war” (Kulturkampf). With the establishment of the unified German state in 1871 under the leadership of the Protestant Prussian Hohenzollern monarchy, the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck introduced a series of laws between 1872 and 1875 that progressively restricted the rights and independence of the Catholic Church and its clergy in German civil and educational life. This legislation provoked a sharp pushback by the German Catholic Church and its members and created an environment in which the Catholic Center Party consolidated its role as the main defender of the political, cultural, and social interests of German Catholics. In the midst of this the government’s minister for cultural affairs (which included education), Adalbert Falk, introduced a decree in 1876 to establish a curriculum in Prussian schools whose reading list included Simplicissimus. Since the government allocated the funds for the purchase of school books, this curriculum became the subject of an intense parliamentary debate that illustrated all of tensions at the heart of the “culture war,” especially conservative Catholic concerns about the elimination of the Church’s role in education. The problem was that there was some dispute over which version of the novel Falk was recommending for use in the schools. As it happened, Falk was actually proposing that a special “youth edition,” scrubbed of its most graphic depictions of sex, violence, and moral degradation, be adopted. But some Catholic members of parliament were concerned that other versions, replete with “aimless wandering, sexual encounters, larceny, indecency, murder, and oath-breaking,” might find their way into students’ hands and lead to the “corruption of their souls” (also bear in mind that the book had

been placed on the Catholic Church's Index of prohibited books). The leading journal of Catholic opinion, Germania, condemned the book as "no more than a compendium of filthy obscenities and lies from the dissolute life of a mercenary in the Thirty Years' War." It can be presumed that this debate, and the press coverage it attracted, did nothing to depress sales of the novel. Nevertheless, expurgated versions of the novel continued to be used in schools through the 1960s. By 1940, the abridged and sanitized "youth edition" first published in 1911 (with illustrations) had sold over 200,000 copies.¹²

Critical editions of Grimmelshausen's collected works, annotated and edited by prominent scholars of German literature, first appeared in the early 1880s and continued to be published in new and revised editions into the 1990s. The annotated editions of the novel that came out in 1919 and 1922 both emphasized the comparisons to be drawn between Germany's suffering in the Thirty Year's War and in World War I.¹³ Simplicissimus has by far remained the most widely-read of Grimmelshausen's works and, in all of its variants (including the large number of pirated and "improved" editions), has never been out of print. The first English translation, by A.T. Goodrick, appeared in 1912, followed by a French and Italian translations in 1922 and 1928, respectively. In the half century after 1945, the novel was translated into an additional thirteen languages, including Chinese, Russian, and Japanese.¹⁴

While the reputation of Simplicissimus as a canonical work of German literature was solidified in the second half of the nineteenth century, its enduring influence on German history writing and the culture of remembrance surrounding modern Germany's understanding of the Thirty Years' War also has to be taken into account. In

particular, the novel's influence on the historical writings of Friedrich Schiller and Gustav Freytag, arguably the two most formative voices that shaped the popular historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Germany, must be examined.

Schiller's History of the Thirty Years' War (1791-1793) and his dramatic Wallenstein trilogy (1798-1799) were the sources of most contemporary educated Germans' knowledge about the war, its main actors, and its causes and legacy. Of the former work, Christoph Wieland observed that it "had so many readers that, of all the books in the German language, it alone allowed people to make an intellectual claim to some level of culture." "I have just been reading [histories] of the Thirty Years' War," Schiller wrote to a friend in 1786, "and my head is still full of it. How curious it is, that this period of greatest national misery should also be one of the brightest pages of human greatness!" His descriptions of the atrocities committed by the foreign mercenaries (mainly Croats and Walloons) during the sack of Magdeburg in 1631 (for most Germans the defining event of the cruelty of the war) indelibly engraved the brutality of the Thirty Years' War into the German national narrative:

The butchery began and the craft of the historian and the art of the poet can find no language to describe it. Neither the innocence of childhood nor the infirmity of age, neither youth, sex, rank, nor beauty could deflect the fury of the conquerors. Women were brutalized in the arms of their husbands and daughters at the feet of their fathers.

Schiller's account of the fate of Protestant soldiers who fell into the hands of Catholic peasants was taken almost word for word from Simplicissimus:

In this land soldiers who did not believe in the Pope were a new and unheard-of phenomenon; the blind zeal of the priests had portrayed [the Swedes] as monsters, the children of hell, and their leader as the anti-Christ. . . . Woe to the lone Swedish soldier who fell into the hands of these savages! Every torture that a fiendish imagination could devise was practiced on these unlucky stragglers. The sight of their mutilated bodies inflamed the Swedish army to a terrible retribution.

In his foreword to Schiller's history, Wieland declared that "such historical pictures from our past are one of the most effective means with which the German nation is brought together and this common spirit energized and maintained." Celebrating Schiller as Germany's "national poet," the liberal journalist Julian Schmidt proclaimed in 1863 that since the publication of Schiller's history of the war, "only a Protestant perception of German history is possible." For their part, Catholic German historians strenuously pushed back against Schiller's interpretation of the war's meaning, arguing that his chronicle reinforced the popular misconception of the Thirty Years' War as a struggle between the dark forces of foreign Catholic tyranny and the Protestant princes who fought for German liberty and independence. In their view such a reading, which they believed had been largely refuted by modern historical research, only perpetuated the marginalization of Catholics as less than authentic Germans. Nevertheless, the "Protestant perception of German history," propagated by Prussian historians, remained dominant well into the twentieth century.

But the great popularizer of the history of the war in nineteenth Germany was Gustav Freytag. His multi-volume and best selling Pictures from the German Past,

launched in 1858, appeared in several editions through the 1920s and was intended as a celebration of the German national spirit. Seizing on the rising German nationalism of the 1860s, Freytag used the series to promote the conclusion that the rise of the kingdom of Prussia to the leadership of a unified Germany was historically inevitable. For Freytag, the story of the Thirty Years' War was particularly useful means to this end as it told of Protestant Germany's heroism and resilience and of its recovery, against great odds, from the economic, social, and cultural destruction of the war. Appearing first in 1858 as a series in the journal Border Courier, Freytag's history of the war opened with a harrowing "sketch of daily life" during the war that borrowed liberally from Simplicissimus. This picture depicted a flourishing Germany that had been morally and spiritually ruined by the ravages of foreign armies, a land emptied of people by plague and massacre, haunted by ghosts and strange heavenly portents, its women raped, tortured, and enslaved, its language debased, its culture destroyed, and its peasantry degenerated into cannibalism and "dull brutality" as it returned atrocity for atrocity. "Because of this war," Freytag wrote, "Germany would be thrown back two hundred years behind her more fortunate neighbors . . . Ruined and powerless, for the next one hundred years her western border was a playground and prize for France." Yet by 1866, with Prussia's victory over Austria in the second of Bismarck's "wars of unification," Freytag could proclaim in the fifth volume of his Pictures that, "it has become a joy to be German, and it soon will be reckoned a great honor among the nations of the earth." The triumphant story of Germany's resurrection as a modern and unified nation state could not be separated from the history of its suffering during the Thirty Years' War.

Book One contains perhaps the best known episodes of Grimmelshausen's novel and its narrative corresponds most closely to the actual events of the author's early life. It introduces us to Simplicius (unnamed for the moment) as he is swept up into the whirlwind of the war as Protestant troops move into the Spessart, a mountainous region in southwestern Germany on the border between lower Bavaria and Hesse. Covered in dense forest, it is somewhat isolated, being bound by the Main river to the west, south, and east and by the Kinzig to the north. The year is 1634, which would make our semi-autobiographical protagonist around ten years old. The Protestant forces under Bernhard of Weimar and the Swedish general Horn are attempting to relieve the town of Nördlingen, under siege by Catholic imperial troops. Simplicius, along with thousands of other refugees, finds himself in flight from the advancing army. Witnessing the destruction and plundering of his home, the torture of his father, and the rape of the farm's women, Simplicius is violently and sudden propelled from the innocence of childhood into the hatred, godlessness, and unreason of war. Pursued by the screams of tortured peasants, he runs into the dark woods where he encounters a pious hermit who takes him in and begins his instruction as a Christian and his transformation from a beast into a man. In a foretaste of the novel's many fantastic and mystical episodes, chapters fifteen through eighteen describe Simplicius's vivid dream of a giant oak tree casting its shadow over all of Europe. Peasants, laborers, and artisans compose its roots and on its lower branches sit the common soldiers. As one looks higher up into the tree, whose boughs are festooned with weapons, one sees the sergeants, the officers and, in the top branches, the aristocratic warlords, each more ostentatiously bedecked with the spoils of war than the last. At its top sits Mars, the god of war (this "war tree" image was

replicated for the frontispiece of a 1727 collection of eye-witness accounts of the destruction of Magdeburg in 1631). This is Simplicius's first vision of the natural order of the world of the Thirty Years' War, a hierarchy of suffering, sin, and corruption that grew out of the systematic plundering and looting that fueled the war and kept the armies in being.

Simplicius's sanctuary is short lived. After the battle he is captured by Protestant troops and taken to the fortress of Hanau and is forced to sing for his supper as a jester for the Swedish garrison's entertainment. Then, in one of the many turns of fortune for the novel's hero, he is captured by a Croat patrol and forced into imperial service. Book Two tells the story of Simplicius's first education as soldier and a predator in a corrupt and violent world. The most singular episode of this book is Grimmelshausen's rendering of the savage battle of Wittstock in October 1636 in chapter twenty-seven. Brief but intense, this passage is one of the most visceral descriptions of the chaos of combat ever written and it surely belongs alongside Lloyd Lewis's account of the Battle of Shiloh during the American Civil War, Henri Barbusse's descriptions of trench combat in World War I, and E. B. Sledge's harrowing memoir of his service as a Marine in the Pacific theater in World War II.

Simplicius manages to escape the carnage more or less intact but soon finds himself back in the ranks, this time in the dragoons. As Book Three opens, Grimmelshausen's young hero is rising in the world as he learns the rules of war. His higher education continues as he is instructed in the wartime economics of looting and robbery (otherwise known as "foraging" and "contributions"), the tactics of deception, trickery, and lying and, most importantly, how to make the best use of the spoils of war

to advance his career. Out of the chaos of war, Simplicius emerges transformed into a famous and feared highwayman, the “Hunter of Soest.” The key encounter in this book is when Simplicius meets the god Jupiter in chapters three and four. Jupiter provides Simplicius, a quick study in the ways of the world, an overview of the political issues at stake for Germany in the Thirty Years’ War. Jupiter sees in the destruction of the war as an opportunity to dismantle the medieval constitutional structure of the Holy Roman Empire and unify Germany in peace and prosperity under the governance of a parliament of wise men. Grimmelshausen’s sketch of Jupiter’s project to abolish feudalism, liberate the towns, reform the system of taxation, and create a more comprehensive system of self-government for the Germans is remarkably similar to the some of the modernizing aims that nineteenth-century historians attributed to the infamous imperial generalissimo Albrecht von Wallenstein. Some of these historians also claimed that the Habsburg emperor ordered Wallenstein’s assassination in 1634 primarily to prevent Wallenstein from carrying out this plan, which would have destroyed the Holy Roman Empire and replaced it with something that looked very much like a unified German polity.

Book Four relates Simplicius’s continued fall from grace and abandonment of God. His fortunes cycle downward at an accelerating rate as he becomes little more than a common thief and confidence man. In some of the novel’s funniest passages, Simplicius finds himself in exile in France, where he thinks his degradation is complete when he is reduced to living on his looks by finding employment as, essentially, a gigolo servicing aristocratic women in Paris. But when his handsome face is scarred by smallpox, his hair falls out, and his voice becomes a croak, even employment as a

prostitute is denied him. At this low ebb, Simplicius makes his way back to Germany and raises a stake by calling himself a doctor and fleecing French peasants by selling them quack medicines. Once back in Germany in the garrison town of Philippsburg, he reestablishes himself as a marauder and freebooter. In chapter nine, Grimmelshausen provides a rich picture of the vital role women played in the war as basically the “service units” behind the front lines. He does not denigrate them as mere camp followers, but depicts them as tough and ingenious survivors making their way in a world of masculine violence. They sew, wash, cook, forage, market essential goods and services, mid-wife, and even serve as soldiers. They too are an important cog in the vast (and profitable) war machine that, after twenty years, has taken on a life and momentum of its own. Here too we can see the inspiration for Grimmelshausen’s 1670 story of the woman Courage that Brecht used as the basis for his play “Mother Courage.”

In Book Four Simplicius also becomes reacquainted with the demonic trickster Oliver, who pushes him deeper into a life of common thievery and base murder for gain. However, Simplicius’s fortunes begin to wheel upwards again when he is reunited with an old friend who, Samaritan-like, had once before saved him from captivity and death. In Book Five Grimmelshausen begins to bring his hero back to his beginnings as a seeker of the Word and salvation of God in a world filled with sin and temptation. The book opens with an account of Simplicius’s brief resumption of a hermit’s life and his religious pilgrimage to Switzerland, a land of such peace and prosperity that, in comparison to a corrupt and war-torn Germany where war has become a way of life, appeared to the pilgrim’s jaded eyes as a land as strange and remote as China or Brazil.

Somewhat restored, Simplicius returns to imperial service. After surviving the brutal battle of Jankau in Bohemia in March 1645, he makes his way back to the land of his birth in western Germany. He marries again (a wife taken in an earlier misadventure has since died), discovers that his adoptive parents are still alive, learns of his true parentage (and name), and settles down to a life as a gentleman farmer (and reluctant husband and father). But he continues to yield to temptation and, as always, sin and misfortune find him. Finally he is compelled to reflect on all the myriad identities the exigencies of war forced him to adopt, his failure to find his true self, and his repeated wanderings from the road of virtue. The second half of Book Five follows Simplicius on a fantastic voyage of self-discovery through magical earthly portals to strange subterranean realms that are paradisiacal mirrors to the inverted world of the German war. Returning to the “real” world above, Simplicius briefly and unsuccessfully resumes the life of a religious hermit before again setting out on the road, travelling far from Germany into Russia, Asia and the Holy Land. This last pilgrimage is described in Book Six, which Grimmelshausen calls a “continuation” of the story of Simplicius. In this coda Grimmelshausen offers the reader an answer to the question that drove the novel’s plot forward: will Simplicius ever escape the inverted universe of the great European war, a mercenary’s world where nothing is as it seems and corruption and evil have buried innocence and truth? In short, will Simplicius Simplicissimus ever find peace?

Notes

¹ Peter H. Wilson, The Thirty Years' War: Europe's Tragedy (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 786-795.

² See Kevin Cramer, The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). This book is the source of all the direct quotations from eighteenth and nineteenth century German histories of the Thirty Years' War.

³ Michel de Montaigne, "On cruelty," in Essays, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 186.

⁴ For further biographical details of Grimmelshausen's life, see Karl F. Otto, Jr., introduction to A Companion to the Works of Grimmelshausen, edited by Karl F. Otto, Jr. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), 1-24; A.T.S. Goodrick, introduction to The Adventures of Simplicissimus, by H.J.C. von Grimmelshausen (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), ix-xxvi; Kenneth Negus, Grimmelshausen (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974); Alan Menhennet, Grimmelshausen the Storyteller: A Study of the "Simplician" Novels (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), 3-27; and George Schulz-Behrend, introduction to The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus, by Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), vii-ix. See also William Rose, "Grimmelshausen and His Simplicissimus," in Men, Myths, and Movements in German Literature (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931), 85-100.

⁵ On the publishing history of the novel, see Menhennet, 5; Schulz-Behrend, viii-ix; Otto, xi-xiv, 3-8; Christoph E. Schweitzer, "Problems in the Editions of

Grimmelshausen's Works," in Otto, 25-44; and Dieter Breuer, "In Grimmelshausen's Tracks: The Literary and Cultural Legacy," in Otto, 235-249.

⁶ Otto, 3; Menhennet, 12-14.

⁷ Schweitzer, 25-30.

⁸ Otto, 3-5; Schweitzer, 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Breuer, 259.

¹¹ Barbara Salditt, Das Werden des Grimmelshausenbildes im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1933), 3-21.

¹² Otto, 9-10; Breuer, 249-250.

¹³ Schweitzer, 33.

¹⁴ Breuer, 250.